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Uses and gratifications of the Food Network

Cori Lynn Hemmah
San Jose State University

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USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF THE FOOD NETWORK

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Cori Lynn Hemmah

May 2009

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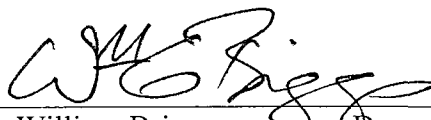
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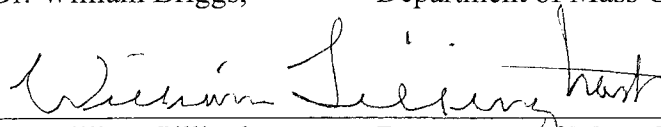
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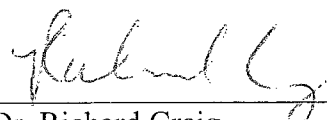
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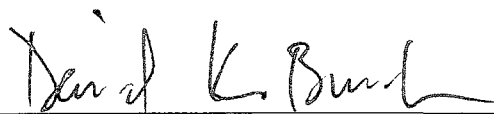


Dr. William Tillinghast, Department of Mass Communications Date 3/30/09



Dr. Richard Craig, Department of Mass Communications Date 4/3/09

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY



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ABSTRACT

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF THE FOOD NETWORK

by Cori Lynn Hemmah

A significant number of cable channels today are comprised of special-topic programming. This thesis analyzes why audiences consume the Food Network and what particular satisfactions they get out of doing so. A qualitative exploratory study of 100 participants was conducted to determine specific motivations and gratifications obtained from watching the Food Network.

Research revealed that information gathering, entertainment, and companionship were the gratifications most often obtained while viewing the Food Network. Programs that teach cooking skills or recipe ideas and are fun or interesting to watch are the most popular forms of Food Network content. Participants enjoy the ability to watch a Food Network program on television and then look up the recipe on the Food Network website so they can attempt to prepare a recipe themselves. The data revealed specific reasons Food Network maintains the high ratings it does, and provided insight to how further research can be applied to other specialty networks to determine what drives audiences to watch special-topic programming.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Have you ever uttered the phrase “there is absolutely nothing on television?” Chances are either you or somebody you were with have said these words out loud, even though cable television offers anywhere from 80 to 500 different channels. On the other hand, it is possible you might have been so enthralled with a program you were watching that even sounds from a cell phone or a doorbell ringing could not succeed in drawing your attention away. With networks specifically intended for sports, reality shows, and cooking, audiences now have the option of consuming a variety of specialty programs tailored to their interests. Because almost 99% of American households have at least one television set, it is important to examine the kind of appeal these special interest programs have for viewers.

What is interesting is the idea that audiences are satisfied watching activities take place on television instead of actually participating in them in real time. A great deal of research has been done on uses and gratifications of media in general, but little research has been conducted on special-interest television networks. Babrow (1987) explored what motivated college students to consistently view soap operas, while other researchers (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003) focused on trying to understand the appeal of consuming reality television and game shows. Because there are so many other categories of specialty networks, researching specific program topics that have not been examined yet will fill a gap in uses and gratifications media research.

The purpose of this study is to determine audience gratifications of watching the

Food Network to understand the reasons and motives behind audiences dedicating their attention to this type of programming. It is important to understand what audiences get out of special-interest networks for two reasons: the first is that networks can continue to provide high-quality content in order to keep their ratings at the levels they are, as well as potentially improve them. The second reason is that this information can be used by advertisers working with the networks to determine what their target audiences are most interested in to market the networks more effectively. By exploring what drives audiences to pay attention to particular content, a greater understanding of how to keep audiences' attention as well as to provide them with the best content possible can be reached.

First, it is important to define what constitutes specialty networks, as well as whom the audiences of these networks are. For the purpose of this thesis, a specialty network is defined as a television network that focuses solely on a specific genre or topic. Examples include channels centering on animals, gardening, sports, religion, and, most importantly in this study, food. Next, research regarding audiences of specialty networks is examined in terms of its definition as well as what audiences gain by consuming these specialty networks, if anything.

After examining specialty networks in general, aspects of the Food Network will be explored in depth. The Food Network history, audiences, ratings, and advertising are important to take into consideration to reveal what researchers already know about the network, as well as what is still unknown. This information will aid in the ability to generalize findings from studying a small group of people to the entire Food Network

audience to discover why people watch the Food Network and what gratifications they obtain from doing so.

Finally, the research surrounding the uses and gratifications theory will be examined in order to learn how this theory has evolved over time to apply to current media studies. McQuail, Blumler, & Brown (1972) note that early uses and gratifications research stemming from the 1940's revolved around radio soap operas before television was a prominent form of media. The works of multiple authors over the years are explored to provide a complete and thorough explanation of the importance of studying the ways audiences have interacted with media as technology has advanced. An assessment of the changes the uses and gratifications perspective has made over the last 60 years is necessary to show how the perspective applies to the study at hand.

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted by having 100 participants answer both open and close-ended questions in regards to the Food Network. The demographics of these participants were fairly similar to the actual demographics of Food Network audiences; however, since the participants were not randomly selected, the current study findings can only be applied to the study participants rather than the greater Food Network audience.

Participants were selected based on whether they watch the Food Network, as well as their willingness to participate. Snowball sampling was also used to find more willing participants in order to meet the qualifications of the study. The completed surveys were analyzed using framework stemming from Rubin's (1983) past uses and gratifications research.

This study will update uses and gratifications research, as well as provide in-depth information about a particular genre of television that has not been studied before. Results will be applicable to other kinds of special topic programming not studied in this thesis, as well as add to existing uses and gratifications literature. Program executives will be able to use the information gathered as insight regarding exactly what their viewers like and dislike about Food Network content, and advertisers will also be able to use this information to target audiences better.

Chapter 2 is the literature review and is divided into four sections: specialty networks and their audiences; Food Network background information and history; past uses and gratifications theory research; and a summary section stating the research questions and study framework. Chapter 3 explains the method used in this study, and data collection, participant selection, survey question selection based on particular research categories, and analysis of data are discussed. Chapter 4 identifies key findings in the study, and Chapter 5 discusses the importance of the study, research limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

To determine why audiences consume specialty programs with special regards to the Food Network, it is important to look at the uses and gratifications theory in relation to television audiences. Audiences have consumed food-related television content at a rapidly growing pace since the Food Network launched in 1993, and 16 years later program executives are doing everything they can to capture new viewers while maintaining core audiences (Downey, 2005). In order to succeed at this task, it is important to recognize specific reasons audiences are driven to the Food Network, and this study will help define specific Food Network audience motivations.

The literature is divided into three sections. The first section addresses specialty networks and their audiences. In addition to concentrating on specialty network history, definitions, and popularity in relation to other types of programming, the main focus is how and why audiences consume specialty networks and what satisfactions they get out of doing so. Special attention is paid to traits and habits of television audiences, as well as how contemporary audiences are viewed completely differently by researchers than they used to be.

The second section depicts important background information pertaining to the Food Network. By describing the types of content viewers consume on the Food Network and how the network has changed since its inception, a better idea of current audience motivations for viewing might be understood. This background information provides a context for the development of the survey questions that research

participants were asked.

The final section examines the uses and gratifications theory, which attempts to explain audience motivations and behavior for media use. This section is divided into three parts, focusing first on its history, then with what constitutes the theory as it is today, and finally with current research and how the theory has changed its focus due to new media and technology developments. This section will aid in setting the framework for this study as well as reveal the reasons the method is outlined as it is.

Specialty Networks and their Audiences

Before taking the most important concepts of the literature into consideration to form research questions, specialty networks must be explained in terms of the definition that will be used in this thesis, as well as what researchers have found while conducting studies about this type of programming. For the purpose of this paper, a specialty network is defined as a television network or channel that focuses on a specific genre or topic. There are a host of examples of this type of programming, including channels focusing on animals, gardening, reality, news, comedy, music, soap operas, and food.

Johnson and Kaye (2003) noted that different content motivates audiences to use media for different reasons, and certain gratifications are met by consuming different types of content. Therefore, understanding these motivations are useful in gaining insight to audience viewing choices and patterns of consuming specific types of program content like the Food Network (Fortunado, 2005). Based on Blulmer's (1979) framework, audience activity including selectivity and motivation for media use, involvement with different mediums and content, and use and satisfaction of media and media content are

examined in this section in order to get a better understanding of audiences of specialty networks.

Audience Selectivity

The concept of the mass audience is no longer taken into account when studying the impact of media. Regarding audiences in general, issues such as making plans in advance to use media, the amount of attention paid to media, and the use of media to fulfill certain needs are most often researched (Blumler, 1979). Advertisers and network producers alike focus more on the individual or smaller groups of people in order to reach them effectively and please them to the best of their ability to keep ratings up.

Because audiences are relatively aware of their needs, networks also need to be aware of what is driving their audiences to their networks to maximize audience gratifications. Preferences for certain genres tend to remain stable by individual media consumers, and program type preference plays a role in motivating audiences to watch certain networks. Beliefs about and consumption of certain genres influence perceptions about which needs will potentially be met (Hawkins et al., 2001), and networks need to know exactly what these needs are before they are able to meet them.

According to Abelman, Atkin, and Rand (1997), viewing motivations and viewing patterns are interrelated, although differences among audiences are important to consider. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) explained that “linking need gratification and media choice lies within the audience member” (p. 511), a notion that goes hand in hand with Ball-Rokeach’s (1998) statement that “individuals’ needs and interests affect what they select out of an environment to perceive” (p. 6). This concept clearly

demonstrates the idea that television audiences are no longer considered a “mass-audience,” especially when it comes to specialty network audiences.

Audience Involvement

Audience activity is often the central focus when exploring media effects (Perse & Rubin, 1988). Because audience members shape their own media experiences, goal-directed intentional media use is important to understand in order to better explain media effects (Rubin & Perse, 1987). Audiences are not equally active all of the time, even when considering the duration of a single media consumption, and this notion affects communication needs and gratifications (Rubin, 1993).

According to Fortunado (2005), networks recognize that audiences have different levels of interaction activity at different times, and tend to schedule program content based on when particular audiences will most likely be actively using media content. Desired target audiences are not only considered by advertisers in terms of content on a specific network; program times also play a big role when deciding where and what to advertise. Researchers are in agreement that motivations for seeking gratifications affect content selection, a concept that determines how active audience members are with what they are consuming.

Interactions with media are also considered when exploring media selectivity. Individual difference factors and audience personality characteristics contribute to the notion that levels of involvement vary during times of media use. Lin (1993) noted that inconsistent levels of involvement are attributed to several reasons, such as distractive behavior during media viewing or using media as a method to simply pass time instead of

fulfilling some need. The connection between activity and involvement is evident, although Blumler (1979) explained that activity relies mostly in people's media motives, selectivity, and involvement with media messages.

What people do with media is at the center of audience involvement, and Webster (1998) noted that research suggests how audiences often have the upper-hand over media professionals. This is because audiences are capable of interpreting what they consume, and can also play a large part in influencing what media is available based on ratings and advertising dollars. Now more than ever, audience involvement is key to understanding what content should be on programs, and the ways media is used by audiences have been researched in countless studies of media technologies.

Audience Usage

It is necessary to discuss audience involvement and selectivity in terms of overall satisfaction, because audiences would not interact with media if they did not get some sort of gratification from doing so. The relationship between previous expectations by audiences before consuming media content and their overall satisfaction after media exposure contributes to future motives to use media (Perse et al., 1988). This is important because if networks understood what motivated their audiences to view their programs in the first place, they could provide more of the said content to increase audience gratifications.

Uses of media include surveillance, correlation, entertainment, and cultural transmission (or socialization) for society in general, as well as individuals (Katz et al., 1973). Other functions of media include diversion, activity, escapism, and personal

relationships and identity with television personalities (Katz et al., 1973; LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001). When considering audience activity in terms of selectivity, involvement, and usage of specialty networks, the reasons behind audience satisfaction is the most relevant idea to the study at hand.

The Food Network

An in-depth examination of Food Network background information will provide a better understanding for what the network already knows about their viewers, as well as what information is still unknown. Information regarding Food Network history, audience demographics, types of programming, advertising information, and supplemental media to the cable network will aid in revealing exactly why Food Network audiences consume the programs they do. By exploring certain relevant aspects of the Food Network, reasons that audiences consume this specialty network content might be applied to studying motivations for consuming other specialty networks in the future.

History

According to Alexander (2006), 20 years ago “chefs were not considered rock stars; they were just the guys in the white jackets who made your dinner, and, unfortunately, they weren’t particularly well-compensated for their efforts” (p.1). When the Food Network launched in 1993, it “existed virtually unto itself in targeting adults interested in cooking shows like “Emeril Live” and, more recently, people interested in food with shows such as “Inside dish” and “Unwrapped.”” (Downey, 2005, para. 5). Today, the network contains entertaining and informative programs for anyone interested in food, regardless of their culinary background.

The Food Network website describes the corporation as “a unique lifestyle network and website that strives to be way more than cooking” (“About FoodNetwork.com,” n.d.). Alexander (2006) points out that “today’s chefs cook on sets decorated with state-of-the-art stainless steel equipment including \$20,000 ice-cream makers; Emeril even has his own house funk band” (p. 4). This embodies the Food Network’s goal of being “committed to exploring new and different ways to approach food - through pop-culture, competition, adventure, and travel – while also expanding its repertoire of technique-based information” (“About FoodNetwork.com,” n.d.).

Though the Food Network “once was known as the Emeril channel or the Bobby Flay channel” because both were on the network when it began 15 years ago, today, viewers “turn to Food Network for more than star chefs” (Waldman, 2008, p. 2). With a vast array of programming that appeal to a variety of demographics, “the network finds itself trying to retain the considerable revenue generated by what has become big business, even as it faces competition from all sides.” (Jensen, 2007, p. 1).

Over the past several years, Food Network has expanded its programming to try and target younger viewers, while still maintaining the core audiences the network captured with its classic in-kitchen programs (Waldman, 2008). Though Alexander (2006) stated that times have changed and “a cult of personality has been created, and a chef’s primary goal seems to be media attention” (p. 1), Food Network audiences appear to be attracted to the network for much more than the famous chefs.

Audience Demographics

Executive Vice President of Style Salaam Coleman Smith explained that the core

fan of Food Network is “likely to be a woman in her mid-40’s” and is slightly more upscale than average, works, is well educated, has kids and might be looking for dinner solutions (Waldman, 2008). The median age of the viewer is 46, their household income is \$63,215, and over 50% are college-educated (Waldman, 2008). The number of viewer households the network is in is up from 86.3 million in 2005, and the network is “distributed to more than 96 million U.S. households and averages more than seven million website users monthly,” (Downey, 2005). The network can also be seen in 147 international countries across all seven continents (“Facts and figures,” 2008).

Food Network is “primarily a female destination,” with the viewership 60-40, female to male, and 70-30 during the daytime (Waldman, 2008). Depending on what hours people work during the day influences the type of programming audiences consume; if it’s day time, viewers might find ideas for that evening’s meal, and at night-time they may relax while watching food-related entertainment. Night-time appears to be more popular, and in 2007, the “prime-time audience of 778,000 viewers was at its highest ever, and it has had success attracting the younger audiences that advertisers find especially attractive” (Jensen, 2007, p. 1).

However, “the network’s day ratings have dipped to an average of 544,000 people from 580,000 a year ago. More significant, its signature weekend block of instructional programs... has lost 15 percent of its audience in the last year” (Jensen, December 2007, p. 1). This might be due to the fact that the Food Network has tried to reach out to a wider audience than it did in the past. Mario Batali, an Italian personality on the Food Network, said that the Food Network didn’t need him anymore and had decided “they are

mass market and they are going after the Wal-Mart crowd” (Jensen, 2007, p. 2).

Regardless of ratings, audiences know that the Food Network is the place to go if you’re a food fan. Food Network Senior Vice President of Marketing and Creative Services Michael Smith explained, “in the same way ESPN is the go-to brand for sports fans, we have tried to make ourselves the go-to brand for food fans” (Waldman, 2008, p. 3). In the last few years, the Food Network has focused on its “strong performance in key advertising demographics, including its core 25-54 demo and the younger 18-49 audience,” and has continued to focus on its goal of reaching younger viewers with the introduction of many new shows (Downey, 2005, p. 2).

Types of Programming

There are three main types of programming the Food Network broadcasts on a daily basis. The first one is labeled as what Jensen (2007) calls “instructional programs,” where the host of the program creates a meal in their home or a set that looks like the kitchen in their home. There is generally only one person in front of the camera, but sometimes they bring in family members or friends to “help” them in the kitchen. Some shows included in this category are *Everyday Italian*, *30 Minute Meals*, *Barefoot Contessa*, *Semi-Homemade*, and *Tyler’s Ultimate*. A variety of different types of cuisines are featured by hosts of these shows, including Italian, Spanish, Mediterranean, Asian, and cuisine from different locations in America, among others.

The next type is what Michael Smith calls “nonfiction shows,” where cameras capture chefs in their everyday lives or businesses and where the “information itself is entertaining” (Waldman, 2008, p. 2). These shows often exhibit chefs traveling around

the world, sampling foreign cuisine, and giving tips on how to get the best food deals for your money. Also included in this category are shows based on competitions, where chefs compete either against other chefs for a monetary incentive or the title of the “best,” or compete against the clock to finish a task in a certain amount of time.

This is important because watching food being prepared is something most viewers can relate to, and airing this every-day activity in the form of a competition is something many viewers are interested in. Watching to see who comes up with the best dish, cake, or 7-course meal is entertaining to people who are already interested in food (Waldman, 2008). This reality-type of program has been appealing to younger viewers especially, as well as succeeded in bringing the ratio of female to male viewers closer to 50-50 than any other type of show on the network (Jensen, 2007). Included in this category are *Ace of Cakes*, *Dinner: Impossible*, *The Next Food Network Star*, *Throwdown with Bobby Flay*, *Iron Chef America*, and *Food Network Challenge*.

The final category is labeled “food talk-shows,” which imitate the structure of a talk show but are solely based on cooking. A live audience is invited to the studio and food is prepared in front of them while celebrity guests are often invited to help cook. There is often a running dialogue with the audience, and at the end of the show, members of the audience are invited to taste whatever was prepared. There are only a couple of these shows on the Food Network such as *Emeril Live!* and *Paula’s Party*, and these shows are not rated nearly as high as the other categories (“Food network viewer,” 2007).

Rachael Ray has recently started her own “weekday syndicated talk show produced by Harpo, Oprah Winfrey’s company” (Waldman, 2008, p. 1). Even though

this show isn't on the Food Network, she helps drive viewers back to the Food Network because she is the hosts of four different programs on the Food Network that spread over all three categories of programming. Michael Smith noted that "Rachael embodies and reflects the core viewer of Food Network...She's a woman in her late 30s, early 40s, into finding quick and easy solutions, she's relatable, bright, obviously works. She's the most popular" (Waldman, 2008, p. 1).

Food Network's main emphasis remains to be helping women, especially during the daytime. It is important to note that female viewers "look to the Food Network for 'entertainment, but entertainment that speaks to her lifestyle, the things that she's interested in" (Walden, 2008, p. 1). Personalities such as Paula Deen, Ina Garten, Giada De Laurentiis, and Sandra Lee host shows focusing on meal solutions and new ideas to help get dinner on the table (Waldman, 2008). Walden (2008) also revealed that "a lot of nonfiction networks...have found that you can do entertainment programming that isn't just comedy or dramas or sports, by doing shows about particular subjects that women are interested in" (p. 1).

Advertising

The majority of advertising content on the Food Network is, not surprisingly, food related. This is different from other networks because "the context in which an ad runs is very important to advertisers...if you're a food or lifestyle advertiser, your ad on Food Network is not seen as an interruption. It's seen as part of the overall experience" (Waldman, 2008, p. 2). In 2008, Food Network planned to premiere one new show a month, as well as invest in consumer products lines and online partnerships in order to

reach out to younger demographics and therefore extend to new advertising categories (Waldman, 2008).

Waldman (2008) noted that “advertisers know the Food Network delivers to female viewers,” which gives them “a great edge” (p. 3). However, Downey (2005) noted that “with a lineup of food-centered lifestyle programs that have been nudging aside in-kitchen cooking shows” (p. 3), Food Network has been trying to grow the network with new shows for younger viewers, but without turning off its core viewers. The network was “projected to grow ad revenue by 7.4% in 2008 and 9.4% in 2009 to \$446 million, according to SNL Kagan research” (Becker, 2008, p. 1).

Food Network doesn’t really have a direct competitor, but instead looks “at other cable networks that are targeting the same type of audience [they] are targeting, like VH1, TLC, and Lifetime on one hand, or even a male-skewing network like Spike” (Downey, 2005). However, Food Network does not even have the biggest food program on cable; that “would be Bravo, whose “Top Chef” competition drew an average 2.6 million viewers an episode in its recent third outing” (Jensen, 2007, p. 3). Regardless, when it comes to advertising the Food Network has a leg up on other networks since advertisers already know that Food Network viewers are more likely to be interested in food-related products than viewers on other networks.

Supplemental Media

The Food Network has extended its brand to the Internet, magazines, and consumer products in an attempt to reach as many viewers as possible, as well as make it easier for viewers to access content they find interesting. FoodNetwork.com delivers

interactive experiences to serve users' needs and "smart content solutions" to pair well with the heavy focus on "seasonal-based programming throughout the year, from no-cook meals and grilling recipes in summer to holiday cookies in winter" ("FoodNetwork.com keeps," 2008).

Recipes prepared by chefs are available to audiences at the click of a button. The kitchen tools chefs use are available from the Food Network Store, a link off the general Food Network website. FoodNetwork.com "completed June 2008 with a unique audience of 8.3 million users making it the No. 1 resource on the Web for Food & Cooking for the 24th consecutive month, the longest continuous leadership in the category's history" ("FoodNetwork.com keeps," 2008).

This is important because users know they have the ability to locate "trusted recipes from the Food Network Kitchens and other professional chefs" if they see something they like on a Food Network program ("FoodNetwork.com keeps," 2008). The website also allows fans to "connect with favorite Food Network hosts like Paula Deen, Bobby Flay, Rachael Ray, and more" says Judy Jones, Senior Vice President of Programming for Style Network Digital, home of FoodNetwork.com." ("FoodNetwork.com keeps," 2008).

Once on their favorite chefs' personal websites, users can purchase the same tools they see the chefs using on television, as well as their books and other merchandise. However, the website was revised in early 2009, and many features that users raved about, such as easy-to-find recipes and simple site navigation, disappeared. It would be interesting to if FoodNetwork.com will do studies to determine how users feel about the

website changes in order to keep up their high number of website users.

Hearst launched a test of *Food Network Magazine* focusing on the “chef-as-celebrity theme” in October of 2008, and publishers believe that “as long as a new title has a distinctive point of view, there is enough consumer interest and ad dollars to go around” (Ovide & Steel, 2008, para. 6). Tighter budgets are “encouraging more people to cook and entertain at home, feeding demand for recipes and advice,” which then drives consumers the magazines and the website (Ovide & Steel, 2008, para. 9).

Overview

This information is important because it shows how much researchers already know about Food Network audiences, as well as what is still unknown. Since its inception in 1993, the Food Network has evolved dramatically to accommodate viewer interest, and it has expanded its target demographics to capture more viewers and more advertising dollars. Researchers know who their main viewers are, what the most popular programs are, and the importance of the time of day a program is aired. Other media to which the Food Network brand extends show how the network is growing, and they allude to how audiences might use Food Network media in the future.

Missing from the research are specific reasons audience members watch Food Network programs and exactly how they use information gathered from the programs they consume. This information could be helpful in continuing to grow the network as well as cater to audience needs more efficiently. In order to research particular audience motivations for watching certain shows and their gratifications from doing so, a better understanding of the uses and gratifications theory is needed.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Pioneered by Elihu Katz in 1959, the uses and gratifications theory suggests that media audiences are active rather than passive when it comes to selecting and accessing certain information (Liang, Hung, & Yi-Cheng, 2006). Katz (1959) introduced the concept of the media having direct effects on mass audiences by examining instead “what people do with the media rather than what the media do to people.” The uses and gratifications perspective is a paradigm in communication research that helps to determine peoples’ motivations for doing what they do with mass media (Katz, 1959; Klapper, 1963; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004).

Uses and gratifications theory explores the idea that different audiences can view the same content on the same mass medium, but for different purposes altogether, and these motivations are at the core of the theory (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). This theory is successful in explaining the psychological and social motives for using particular media, as well as the needs that are satisfied by actively using media (Lin, 1993). Uses and gratifications theory is the theoretical focus that will be used in explaining why audiences consume specialty television networks like the Food Network.

Uses and Gratifications History

Uses and gratifications is a psychological communication perspective stemming from the notion that there is choice and individual differences when it comes to determining direct media effects (Rubin, 1993). From its beginning, uses and gratifications theory has provided a foundation for creating descriptions of intended uses by audiences and resulting satisfactions (Stafford et al, 2004). Disregarding the concept

of the public as “an undifferentiated mass,” Katz (1959) introduced the assumption of the audience as being active, a notion that remains central to the theory.

Although Rubin (1984) noted that not all audiences actively consume media all of the time in order to achieve some sort of gratification, audience activity is almost always included in the reason behind researching media effects. Researchers such as Blumler (1979) and Lin (1996) observed that the level of audience activity is the most important factor when determining the level of gratifications obtained by media users. In turn, motivations for using media directly depend on what exactly the audience aims to achieve by consuming media (Johnson et al., 2003).

Uses and gratifications theory was founded on three basic premises, which were outlined by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) as follows:

1. People are goal directed in their behavior.
2. They are active media users.
3. They are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs.

These premises are still apparent in the uses and gratifications approach today, although new research has expanded on these concepts to make this theory more applicable to new media technology.

It is also important to note the concept of selective perception, or the idea that audience needs and interests influence the information they get out of a particular environment (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). This is significant because selective perception introduces the concept of disregarding the direct-effects approach of mass media that many researchers had accepted before the uses and gratifications approach was

introduced by Katz in 1959 (Klapper, 1963). Therefore, instead of being thought of simply a social theory with specific direct consequences, uses and gratifications is now considered a functional perspective with the ability to produce conclusions about social or psychological consequences (Lin, 1996).

Recent Developments in Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications perspective as it appears today developed over time when some researchers stopped asking the question “Why don’t the media have effects?” to “What do individuals do with the media?” (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). Now, scholars think about the levels of dimensions sought from using media, with dimensions varying between functions and among factors (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2002).

Gratification function distinctions stem from Rubin (1984) when he introduced the difference between instrumental versus ritual functions. Instrumental functions are goal-oriented uses of media to “gratify informational needs or motives,” and are more predictive of intentional audience activities, and ritualized functions are habitual use of media “for diversionary reasons” and more predictive of less-intentional audience activities (Abelman et al., 1997; Lin, 1993). Rubin and Perse (1987) found that viewers with instrumental motives had higher levels of gratifications than ritualized viewers, a concept particularly relevant when it comes to researching specialty networks and what types of gratifications audiences achieve.

A list of common gratification factors sought by audiences has been compiled over the years to provide researchers with a basis for determining reasons audiences

consume media. The most common categories are activity, social, novel sensory, and self-reactive (LaRose et al., 2001). In other words, entertainment, social interaction, information seeking, and escapism are common gratifications audiences achieve by consuming media, particularly television.

However, Palmgreen, Wenner, and Rayburn (1981) noted that gratifications being sought do not predict media behavior very well, and instead it is the gratifications actually obtained that have greater explanatory power (as cited in LaRose et al., 2001). These distinctions have provided insight to scholars for audiences of many different types of programming (Abelman et al., 1997). The terms of typical uses and sought gratifications by audiences make up the first part of a two-stage research design profile that is commonly used in uses and gratifications research. The second stage groups “descriptive terms” together to represent specific audience gratifications and uses for a particular medium (Stafford et al., 2006).

This is important because this two-stage design describes the contemporary view of uses and gratifications theory summarized by Rubin and Windahl (1986). Agreed upon by several key researchers of the theory (e.g., Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rubin, 1994; Palmgreen, 1984), the five general assumptions of uses and gratifications research are:

1. Communication behavior such as media use is typically goal-directed or motivated. Such behavior is functional for people; it has consequences for people and societies.
2. People select and use communication sources and messages to satisfy felt

needs or desires. Media use is a means to satisfy wants or interests such as seeking information to reduce uncertainty or to solve personal dilemmas.

3. Social and psychological factors mediate communication behavior. Behavior is a response to media only as filtered through one's social and psychological circumstances such as the potential for interpersonal interaction, social categories, and personality.

4. Media compete with other forms of communication for selection, attention, and use. There are definite relationships between media and interpersonal communication for satisfying needs or wants.

5. People are usually more influential than media in media-person relationships.

These assumptions will set the framework for describing audience motives of watching specialty networks. As the next section will show, even with recent changes in media technology, the uses and gratifications approach continues to be beneficial in determining audience incentives for consuming media the way they do.

Current Uses and Gratifications Research

According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), uses and gratifications theory originally assumed that all media users are goal-directed when interacting with media. These needs have been studied every time a new media technology has been introduced, and are accepted and applicable to the majority of situations involving communications (Lin, 1996; Leung & Wei, 2000; Ko et al, 2005). Traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television, as well as non-traditional media such as cable television, pagers, e-mail, and the Internet have all been researched in terms of audiences' decisions to use

them based on what gratifications they can obtain from them (Ko et al., 2005).

Because of the broad range of technology uses and gratifications theory covers, Stafford et al. (2006) found it important to distinguish between content and process gratifications. Content gratifications concern actual information, messages, or entertainment carried by the medium, while process gratifications deal with the experience or actual use of the medium itself. This distinction is relevant because when the uses and gratifications approach was originally developed, only traditional mass media technologies existed, but more recently user or “customer-level” views of mass media were being considered more often (Stafford et al., 2006).

This trend will probably continue as more and more interactive technologies are developed, and the uses and gratifications theory should shift to become more personal when considering audience motivations (Stafford et al., 2006). More research on studies involving specific genres or topics like the Food Network is slowly expanding the uses and gratifications paradigm. Research has shown that religious networks, soap operas, and reality television in particular allows viewers to relate to people they watch on television in relatively new ways to make audiences feel as if they are a part of the television characters’ lives (Nabi et al., 2003; Abelman, 1987).

Rubin (1993) states that researchers have “just touched the surface” when it comes to understanding the affects of mediated communication on societies and individuals. As technology continues to become more interactive, audiences will have greater power when it comes to selecting and using specific media content. Therefore, understanding specific motivations of audiences of specialty networks will become more

and more important in order for networks to continue to capture viewers as technology advances.

Overview and Conclusion

The literature showed that the uses and gratifications approach has adapted over time to extend to new media technology such as cable television and the Internet. Since cable television made it possible for specific genre programs to prosper, the uses and gratifications theory can be applied to uncovering new information about Food Network audiences.

Katz's (1959) research paved the way in changing how audiences were viewed, which gave more power and to the audience when selecting media content and defined the audience as an active instead of a passive one. Audience activity and the actual gratifications that result from using media were clearly outlined by Blumler (1979), and since multiple studies have used his definitions of gratifications when conducting research, the proposed study will use them as well.

Johnson et al. (2003) introduced the idea that specific media content generates different gratifications by different audiences, leading to a search for research concentrating on audience gratifications based on television genres. Finally, Perse and Rubin's (1987) study regarding audiences of soap operas provided a context for studying audiences of special topic programs, and their method will be useful when conducting the proposed research on Food Network audiences.

Aside from studies concerning news programs, reality television, and soap operas, research is lacking when it comes to specific television genres and the audiences that

interact with them. Audience activity regarding selectivity, involvement, and use based on Blumler's (1979) framework, as well as his definitions for different types of gratifications depending on media content, will be used to reveal more in-depth explanations for audience motivations to watch the Food Network. Past uses and gratifications research combined with information pertinent to audiences of specialty networks will help reveal new and more specific information about Food Network audiences. These results will not only add to uses and gratifications literature, but can also be applied when studying other specialty networks in the future.

The research questions are as follows:

1. Why are food-based television programs viewed?
2. What are specific gratifications that audiences obtain from consuming these programs?
3. What are the key issues or topics viewers feel programs should focus on in order to continue to satisfy audiences?

CHAPTER 3

Method

Based on methods from the limited research on special genre networks, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted by asking both closed and open-ended questions to Food Network audiences. Researchers already know that the target audience of the Food Network is women in their late 30's to early 40's. This audience made up the majority of the study participants, although it was important to interview other viewers as well because men and younger viewers make up 30 to 40 percent of Food Network viewers. Participants were gathered by emailing the questionnaire to contacts, as well as by searching for online food-related blogs and emailing the blog authors with the questionnaire attached. Snowball sampling was also conducted by asking every person who completed the survey if they knew of others who watched the Food Network in order to reach the target participant amount.

Study Design

The way the research was conducted regarding motivations for watching the Food Network will be described in this section. This includes how the interviewees were determined, how the data was collected, an overview of the selection of the survey questions, and how the results were analyzed.

Collection of Data

Approximately 100 interviewees were asked to complete a short survey on the Food Network. Questionnaires were emailed to food blog writers, coworkers who watch the Food Network, and passed on to family members and their friends. This helped

ensure that responses covered a broad range of ages as well as enough participants were recruited to satisfy similar demographics the Food Network targets.

Also, using snowball or respondent driven sampling, “data are collected via a link-tracing (snowball) design, where current sample members recruit future sample members” (Salganik, 2006). Using this method, more participants were gathered by asking the people who agreed to fill out the survey if they knew other people who watch the Food Network. Those people were contacted as well to see if they would be interested in filling out the survey for the purpose of meeting the required amount of participants.

A small group of participants were sought out before the study began to determine whether the survey questions were clear to the interviewees and relevant to the study at hand. This aided in making sure the information collected was information that helped to provide the data needed to attempt to answer the research questions. These surveys were not included in coding the data and forming the results.

Past research has already revealed the demographics of who watches the Food Network and which shows they watch the most. However, specific reasons for viewing these programs had not been identified, and the best way to do this was to conduct a qualitative exploratory study with both closed and open-ended questions. This type of study was the most useful in identifying general motivations for viewing based on past uses and gratifications research, but also allowed participants to express why they personally interact with Food Network programs in the way they do.

According to Wrench et. al. (2008), a questionnaire “is a form containing a series

of questions and mental measures that is given to a group of people in an attempt to gain statistical information about the group as part of a survey” (214). A questionnaire asking qualitative questions enabled some of the gathered data to be analyzed without any prior expectations, a notion that was useful in adding to the data that was already known about the Food Network.

Participant Selection

The questionnaire was distributed to willing participants over a three-month period (between December 2008 and February 2009) in order to find enough participants to reach the target amount. Each participant completed one survey, which took between 10 and 15 minutes to complete. Costs included printing survey questionnaires if they were distributed by hand instead of received through email.

Each participant was required to have some knowledge or have had some interaction with the Food Network. Overall, 100 questionnaires were subject to data analysis, as the questionnaire was distributed to 106 people, and six were incomplete or illegible. Out of the 100 participants, 82% were female ($n = 82$) and 18% ($n = 18$) were male. Nine participants were between 18 and 25 years old (9%), 26 were between 25 and 34 (26%), 23 were between 35 and 44 (23%), 28 were between 44 and 54 (28%), and 14 were between 55 and 64 (14%). 36 participants worked less than 40 hours a week, while 64 worked equal to or more than 40 hours a week. 33 participants revealed that they watch the Food Network during the day time, 51 watch it at night time, and 16 watch it both during the day and at night. 94% of participants had visited or searched FoodNetwork.com

Survey Questions Selection

Haridakis & Whitmore (2006) explain how important Alan Rubin's 1983 Television Viewing Motives scale was to advancing audience motivation research. The 27 questions regarding motivations for television viewing has been adapted and applied to study different forms of television content, as well as new media such as the Internet (Haridakis et. al., 2006). For this study, the question format was based off of Rubin's original questionnaire, but altered to apply to current Food Network content and its viewers.

Research Categories

Only three questions concerning participant demographics were asked in order to compare the new data with past research on Food Network audiences. The remaining questions only concerned participant use and motivations for consuming the programs they do. The survey questions fit into several research categories based on past uses and gratifications research. Categories relevant to media usage include passing time, information gathering, entertainment, companionship, and escape (Rubin, 1981).

However, since this study was most interested in motivations for viewing a specialty network, open-ended questions referencing a show, television personality, or genre pertinent to the Food Network were also necessary. Participant answers based on the 5-point Likert scale regarding how they use the Food Network contributed to past uses and gratifications research in general, while answers to specific open-ended questions will potentially add to Food Network research and help the network gain a deeper insight about their viewers.

In order to clearly explain how the survey questions applied to the proposed research questions, the six categories used to code that data are outlined below. The first five categories were answered using the 5-point Likert scale, while the last section included open-ended questions for participants to answer on their own:

Time Passing

1. I only watch shows on the Food Network when I can't find anything else to watch on television.
2. I watch the Food Network while waiting for other programs to begin.
3. I watch the Food Network during commercials for other programs.
4. If the Food Network no longer existed, it would not bother me.

Information Gathering

1. I find shows on the Food Network informative.
2. I have tried to prepare recipes demonstrated on the Food Network.
3. I have tried to copy techniques demonstrated by chefs on the Food Network.
4. I enjoy shows on the Food Network that teach a new recipe or cooking skill.

Entertainment

1. I enjoy watching programs on the Food Network.
2. I find shows on the Food Network entertaining.
3. I think the Food Network produces content of substantial quality.
4. Programs on the Food Network keep my attention from the beginning to the end of an episode.

Companionship

1. I feel a connection to the chefs/television personalities on the Food Network.
2. I have talked about the Food Network with my peers.
3. I watch certain Food Network programs with other people on a regular basis.
4. I would like to meet the chefs/television personalities on the Food Network.

Escape

1. Watching the Food Network helps me feel relaxed.
2. I enjoy the reality programs (*The Next Food Network Star*, *Food Network Challenge*, *Ace of Cakes*) on the Food Network.
3. Watching the Food Network takes my mind off of other problems.
4. In general, I feel content while watching the Food Network.

Open-Ended Questions

1. On average, how many days a week do you watch the Food Network?
2. How many programs do you consistently watch on a regular basis?
3. Who is your favorite chef/television personality on the Food Network? Why?
4. Who is your least favorite chef/television personality on the Food Network?
Why?
5. What are your top three favorite shows on the Food Network?
6. What is your favorite type of content on the Food Network?
7. How do you feel while watching the Food Network?
8. Have you ever gone on FoodNetwork.com to look up a recipe?
9. If yes, what do you like about FoodNetwork.com?
10. What do you dislike about FoodNetwork.com?

11. Do you think Food Network and FoodNetwork.com work well with each other? Why or why not?
12. I am: M/F (circle one)
13. My age: 18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+ (circle one)
14. I work ____ hours a week.

Analysis of Data

Roughly half of the survey questions were close-ended using the 5-point Likert-type scale. The other half were open-ended to find out exactly the reasons that motivate the participant to view the programs they do, and questions were coded depending on the gratification category into which they fell.

After the surveys were completed, data were analyzed following the guidelines introduced by past qualitative studies. First, it is important to mention the credibility of qualitative research in general. Cutcliffe and McKenna (1999) note that qualitative research is credible “when the practitioners themselves and the readers of the theory view the study findings and regard them as meaningful and applicable in terms of their experience” (p. 379). Thus, data were categorized to compare and contrast the results revealed in this study to results from past uses and gratifications research.

Data analysis took two weeks to finalize after all of the questionnaires were completed and collected. The answers to the closed-ended questions were entered into the SPSS database to determine how audiences used Food Network content. The open-ended questions were compared with one another as well as against current Food Network information to determine if study participant answers matched up with Food

Network rating information. Not all data were useful and were, therefore, excluded in the analysis of gathered data and reported findings.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This section is organized according to the individual sections in the questionnaire about the Food Network to provide support in answering the three research questions outlined earlier in this study. The first section examines the questions regarding participant demographics, and the frequency and times of use of the Food Network. The second section reflects the answers to the 20 Likert-type questions stated in the first part of the questionnaire. This data are grouped according to the five categories discussed above (time passing, information gathering, entertainment, companionship, and escape). The final section explores the qualitative data collected, including personal feedback and opinions of the participants.

Participant Demographics

The first research questions was “Why are food-based television programs viewed?” Participant demographics alone did not provide strong insight to what motivated participants to consume Food Network programs. There is not a strong relationship between gender and the time of day participants watch the Food Network ($\chi^2 = .253$), nor is there a relationship between the number of shows participants watch consistently and whether they watch more in the day or at night ($\chi^2 = .977$). In terms of the number of hours worked and the number of shows participants watch consistently, there is not a strong correlation ($\chi^2 = .764$).

There is a significant correlation between participant age and the time of day participants watch the Food Network ($\chi^2 = .013$). Participants between 25 and 44 tend to

watch the Food Network more at night time than in the day time, with 33 watching it a night and only 8 watching it during the day within those age groups. There is also a strong relationship between the amount of hours participants work in a week and whether participants watch the Food Network in the day or at night ($\chi^2 = .000$). 40 participants who work more than 40 hours watch the Food Network only at night, while only 12 participants who work 40 hours or more and watch the Food Network during the day. 12 participants who work 40 hours or more watch the Food Network both during the day and at night, while only 4 participants who work less than 40 hours watch the Food Network both during the day and at night. 21 participants who work less than 40 hours a week watch the Food Network during the day, while 11 participants working less than 40 hours a week watch the Food Network at night.

Results According to Research Category

Four questions per category were laid out in no particular order for a total of 20 close-ended questions. All 100 participants answered each of the Likert-type questions to help gather data regarding the three research questions. These question responses provided insight to the research question “Why are food-based programs viewed?”

Time Passing

In response to the question, “I watch the Food Network while waiting for programs on other networks to begin,” 30% either agreed or strongly agreed, 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 26% were neutral ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.281$). Thirty percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the question, “I watch the Food Network during commercials for other programs,” 50% disagreed or strongly

disagreed, and 20% were neutral ($M=2.78$, $SD=1.292$). For the question, “If the Food Network no longer existed, it would not bother me,” 18% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed, while 68% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 14% were neutral ($M=2.16$, $SD=1.426$). Twelve percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to “I only watch shows on the Food Network when I can’t find anything else to watch on television,” 76% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12% were neutral ($M=1.99$, $SD=1.049$).

Information Gathering

Eighty-four percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “I find shows on the Food Network informative,” while 16% were neutral ($M=4.38$, $SD=.749$). For the question, “I have tried to prepare recipes provided by shows on the Food Network,” 75% of participants agreed or strongly agreed, 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 10% were neutral ($M=4.12$, $SD=1.23$). In response to “I have tried to copy techniques demonstrated by chefs on the Food Network,” 79% agreed or strongly agreed, 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 10% were neutral ($M=4.16$, $SD=1.14$). Eighty-six percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “I enjoy shows on the Food Network that teach a new recipe or cooking skill,” 6% disagreed, and 8% were neutral ($M=4.34$, $SD=.867$).

Entertainment

In response to the question, “I enjoy watching shows on the Food Network,” 90% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed, and 10% were neutral ($M=4.5$, $SD=.674$). To the question, “I find shows on the Food Network entertaining,” 90% agreed or

strongly agreed and 10% were neutral ($M=4.38$, $SD=.663$). Eighty-one percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “I think the Food Network produces content of substantial quality” ($M=4.06$, $SD=.827$). Sixty-eight percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “Programs on the Food Network keep my attention from the beginning to the end of an episode,” while 8% disagreed and 30% were neutral ($M=3.8$, $SD=.921$).

Companionship

For the question, “I have talked about shows on the Food Network with my peers,” 86% agreed or strongly agreed, 6% disagreed, and 4% were neutral ($M=4.24$, $SD=1.055$). In response to “I watch certain Food Network programs with other people on a regular basis,” 38% agreed or strongly agreed, 48% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 14% were neutral ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.539$). Thirty-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “I feel that I have a connection to the chefs/television personalities on the Food Network,” 34% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 33% were neutral ($M=2.94$, $SD=1.221$). In response to “I would like to meet the chefs/television personalities on the Food Network,” 54% agreed or strongly agreed, 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 16% were neutral ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.367$).

Escape

Fifty-two percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to the question, “Watching the Food Network takes my mind off of other problems,” 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 28% were neutral ($M=3.47$, $SD=1.201$). In response to “In general, I feel content while watching the Food Network,” 68% agreed or strongly

agreed, 30% disagreed or strongly agree, and 24% were neutral ($M=4.10$, $SD=.969$). For the question, “Watching the Food Network helps me feel relaxed,” 61% agreed or strongly agreed, 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 30% were neutral ($M=3.75$, $SD=.978$). Forty percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the question, “I enjoy Food Network reality shows,” 42% disagree or strongly disagree, and 17% were neutral ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.481$).

Results According to Participant Opinion

The second research question was “What are specific gratifications that audiences obtain from consuming these programs?” Fifty-eight percent of participants listed in-kitchen programs as either their favorite, or one of their favorite, types of programming, followed by travel (28%), shows that teach a new skill or do cooking demonstrations (20%), challenges (18%), and reality (16%). The answers to the other open-ended questions reveal why in-kitchen programming is the most popular.

Participant Feelings While Watching The Food Network

When asked, “How do you feel while watching the Food Network,” answers consisted of a variety of one-word responses, occasionally followed by an explanation of why they felt a certain way. These feelings included “relaxed” (30%), “content” (20%), “fine” (18%), “motivated” (16%), “hungry” (14%), “entertained” (14%), “attentive” (8%), “frustrated” (8%), “envious” (4%), and “interested” (4%). Participants expanded on their answers when they listed more than one feeling (“It ranges from frustration at the bad cooking shows to excitement about trying new recipes”), or when they had a specific example demonstrating their feeling (“Frustrated by how ridiculous some shows are – not

meant for serious cooks anymore”).

Favorite Food Network Personality

The third question was “What are the key issues or topics viewers feel programs should focus on in order to continue to satisfy audiences?” Participants were able to give detailed insight on what motivated them to watch certain shows or chefs on a regular basis. Almost a quarter of participants (24%) listed Ina Garten as their favorite when asked, “Who is your favorite chef/television personality on the Food Network? Why?” Participants noted that Ina has great recipes, a nice personality, is self-taught, has a high skill-level, and is a great teacher. Alton Brown followed with 16% of participants listing him as their favorite for being knowledgeable, interesting, having a good sense of humor, and showing the science behind the cooking. Twelve percent of participants listed Paula Dean as their favorite, and said she is warm, genuine, friendly, comforting, welcoming, makes good food, has delicious recipes, and has a great personality.

Bobby Flay, Emeril Lagasse, and Rachael Ray each had 10% of participants list them as their favorite. Bobby Flay was said to have a good approach, great recipes, demonstrate his cooking expertise, and is consistently inventive. Emeril was noted to have great, easy recipes, is entertaining and engaging, and teaches food preparation. Rachael Ray has quick easy meals, is very friendly, and is always excited about what she’s doing.

Eight percent of participants listed either Tyler Florence or Guy Fieri as their favorite; Tyler for preparing great recipes that look delicious, and Guy for being friendly, real, and inspirational. Six percent of participants listed Giada De Laurentiis as their

favorite for having good dishes and a great technique, 4% of participants noted Duff Goodman for being personable, genuine, and fun, and 2% listed Masaharu Morimoto for being an incredible chef with great knowledge.

Least Favorite Food Network Personality

Several chefs who were listed as some participants' favorites were listed as others' least favorites. Twenty-four percent of participants listed Sandra Lee as their least favorite chef for a variety of reasons: she is dull, has no talent in cooking, has obvious swap-outs, she dresses to match her kitchen appliances, the food looks gross, her recipes are bad, she's annoying and irritating, and she has a horrible voice. Rachael Ray had 16% of viewers list her as their least favorite, for being annoying, over-the-top, loud, goofy, horrible on camera, obnoxious, having bad recipes, and not being able to cook. 8% listed The Neelys as their least favorite, for having uninteresting dishes, being obnoxious and too over-the-top, as well as for being annoying and too "syrupy sweet."

Six percent of the participants listed Alton Brown for being weird and annoying, and 4% listed Robin Miller, Michael Symon, Guy Fieri, or Paula Dean as their least favorite. Participants said Robin Miller is hard to connect with and boring; Michael Symon is mean; Guy Fieri is too loud, over-the-top, boring, and weird; and Paula Dean has unhealthy recipes and uses too much butter. Bobby Flay and Ina Garten each had 2% of participants list them as their least favorite: Bobby Flay for being annoying and over-hyped, and Ina Garten for being difficult to connect with.

Favorite Food Network Shows

Participants were asked the question "What are your top three favorite shows on

the Food Network?” Several shows were listed much more frequently than others, including *Barefoot Contessa* (38%), *Good Eats* (22%), *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Drives* (20%), and *30 Minute Meals* (20%). Participants also stated *Everyday Italian* (16%), *Iron Chef America* (16%), *Ace of Cakes* (14%), and *Paula Deen* (14%) as one of their three favorites. *Emeril Live* (12%), *Tyler’s Ultimate* (10%), *Boy Meets Grill* (8%), and *Throwdown with Bobby Flay* (8%) also had a relatively high number of participants list them as their favorite show.

Six percent of participants listed either *Jamie at Home* or *Food Network Challenge* as one of their favorites, and 4% listed either *Ultimate Recipe Showdown*, *Unwrapped*, *BBQ with Bobby Flay*, or *The Next Food Network Star*. Two percent listed either *Secrets of a Restaurant Chef*, *Grill It with Bobby Flay*, *Giada at Home*, *Rachael’s Taste Travels and Vacations*, *Sara’s Secrets*, or *Quick Fix Meals with Robin Miller*.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Understanding specific audience motivations for consuming Food Network programs based on past uses and gratifications research was the main goal of this study. The findings demonstrated participants' strong opinions regarding their reasons for watching the Food Network, and these opinions give deeper insight to past research that could help the Food Network progress in the future. The following section reveals the relationship between past uses and gratifications findings and results from this study, compares past Food Network research to current participant views and opinions, describes limitations to the study at hand, and provides suggestions for future special genre television research.

According to the data gathered in this study, food-based programs are viewed mostly because they are informative and entertaining. Participants are motivated to watch the Food Network because they feel content and relaxed, they learn cooking skills and techniques, and they can take the knowledge they gather and apply it to their real lives. Favorite Food Network television personalities are friendly, knowledgeable, and entertaining, and prepare delicious-looking food. Participants in this study enjoy the ability to watch an episode on the Food Network and then immediately download the episode recipes from the Food Network website for their own use. Even with all of the new shows and content Food Network has recently introduced, in-kitchen programming is still the most popular.

When the uses and gratifications theory was first introduced by Katz in 1959, the

concept of audiences being active instead of passive when selecting certain information was most relevant to the theory. In 1974, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch noted that people are goal-directed in their behavior, are aware of their needs, and know how to select media to gratify these needs. These needs provided the framework for the Likert-type questions in this study which included questions based on time passing, information gathering, entertainment, companionship, and escapism. They also helped in forming the open-ended questions participants were asked, as the responses provided the relevant data necessary in answering the proposed research questions.

Contributions to the Study of Specialty Network Television

Time passing was the weakest use the participants reported on, as the majority did not watch the Food Network during commercials for other programs or while waiting for other programs to begin. They also did not watch the Food Network simply because they could not find anything else to watch on television. This finding is consistent with one of the five general assumptions of uses and gratifications research stating that people select and use media to satisfy certain needs, wants, or interests (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rubin, 1994; Palmgreen, 1984). If participants did not want to watch the Food Network or were not interested in the content provided on the network, they would most likely find other ways to satisfy their immediate media needs or wants.

Information gathering was one of the strongest uses reported by study participants. Most find the Food Network informative and enjoy learning new recipes or cooking skills, and have tried to prepare recipes or copy techniques demonstrated on Food Network programs. This gratification function is considered an instrumental

function as described by Rubin (1984), as participants use the Food Network to satisfy particular food-related goals by gathering information they are interested in. In-kitchen programs that tend to prepare recipes from beginning to end and shows that teach viewers cooking skills or demonstrate recipes was listed as a favorite type of programming by 80% of participants. Some participants feel attentive while watching Food Network programs as well as motivated to attempt on their own the things they learned.

When explaining why they had listed a particular chef as their favorite, many participants noted they liked chefs for “being a great teacher,” “demonstrating technique,” and “teaching food preparation.” One participant listed a chef as their least favorite for “not being able to cook.” Furthermore, the top three shows most frequently listed by participants as one of their favorites are all in-kitchen shows that demonstrate new recipes and skills by the program personality. In line with one of the three basic uses and gratifications premises (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), participants appear to actively use the Food Network as a way to gratify their need to learn food preparation, cooking skills and technique, and ways to prepare new recipes.

Almost all of the participants enjoy watching shows on the Food Network and find the shows entertaining. As a prerequisite for completing the questionnaire, participants had to have interest in the Food Network and be somewhat knowledgeable about program content. Most agreed that the Food Network has content of substantial quality, and agree that their attention is held from the beginning to the end of an episode. Hawkins et al. (2001) notes that program content preference motivates audiences to interact with certain media, so it is not surprising that participants approve of Food

Network quality and are entertained when watching the network.

Entertainment is a ritualized function often used for diversion (Abelman et al., 1997; Lin, 1993), and participants often cited “entertainment” when describing the reasons behind why they liked or did not like something. Many participants said that their favorite Food Network chef was entertaining, engaging, or fun to watch, and chefs that were listed as a participant’s least favorite were said to be dull, uninteresting, boring, bad on camera, or annoying. This is important because unpopular chefs or television personalities can harm ratings and turn away advertisers; if audience needs are not met with a certain form of media, it is very easy for them to search for alternative media to satisfy these needs.

Several participants stated that they feel entertained while consuming particular topics on the Food Network, especially ones that teach something new or involve contests and challenges. Reality shows and competitions are often aired at night-time when the ratings are highest (Jensen, 2007); however, although more than half of the participants in this study watch the Food Network at night, challenges and reality programs were the two least favorite types of programming. This data are consistent with how participants rated their top three favorite shows as reality and challenge programs were in the middle-to-bottom range, although data are inconsistent with past Food Network show ratings.

The data showed that companionship was not a strong gratification participants reported on. Although the majority stated that they have talked about shows on the Food Network with their peers, responses were varied when it came to watching shows with other people on a regular basis and feeling connected to the Food Network personalities.

Roughly half of the participants wanted to meet the chefs, especially ones they saw as being inspirational or role-models.

The chefs that were listed as favorites often were described as having a nice or good personality and a sense of humor; appearing to be genuine, comforting, and welcoming; and acting friendly. Participants were likely to list chefs as their least favorites if they thought the person was irritating, annoying, loud, mean, obnoxious, over-the-top, fake, or were hard to connect with, and over a third of participants did not feel they had a connection to Food Network personalities.

Connection to the audience is relevant to the idea Stafford et al. (2006) touches on when he predicts how personal connections will become more important to the uses and gratifications theory as media interactivity becomes more prominent. The data demonstrate how the Food Network exhibits entertainment, information gathering, and companionship as gratifications with the ability to qualify as both content and process gratifications as outlined by Stafford et al. (2006). As stated earlier, content gratifications concern messages, information, and entertainment carried by the medium, and process gratifications deal with the use or experience of the medium itself.

A couple participants noted that they recorded shows with recipes they were interested in or excited about trying, and then played the episode back while they prepared the recipes in real time. Having the program on a television in their kitchen allowed participants to start and stop the episode as they pleased, and also allowed the chef to actually come in to their kitchen as a meal was being prepared.

Media interactivity is also prominent when viewers watch an episode on

television, and then use the Internet to look up the recipe from the show they were just watching. The majority of participants had used the Food Network website to research recipes and meal ideas after viewing a particular episode, and several participants noted that they only try recipes from chefs they enjoy watching on television.

The final gratification used as a framework for this study, escapism, appears at first glance to go against the premises outlined by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) that state how audiences are goal directed, active media users who are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs. However, ritualized functions, which are habitual use of media “for diversionary reasons,” help explain how escapism can be a particular goal-directed need.

More than half of participants agreed that watching the Food Network takes their mind off their problems, and most agreed that they felt content and/or relaxed while watching Food Network programs. Participants reported that they felt relaxed, content, and fine most often when asked how they feel while watching the Food Network, although it is possible “relaxed” and “content” came up most often because these were two questions in the Likert-type portion of the survey. Reality programs, a form of content closely associated with escapism, were reported to be generally enjoyed by participants when asked as a Likert-type question; this content was the least favorite, however, when asked as an open-ended question.

Past Food Network research emphasized that the network has recently tried to reach out to a younger audience by introducing new programs and alternative forms of content than what has been on the Food Network for the last 15 years. Data from the

current study regarding the age of a participant and the time of day they watched the Food Network was consistent with past Food Network findings. The younger viewers the Food Network has been targeting are watching the Food Network now much more than they used to, which is good for Food Network advertisers and producers alike (Downey, 2005).

There was also a strong correlation between amount of hours worked in a week and the time of day a person watched the Food Network, which is relevant because Food Network findings reported a drop in day-time ratings and a rise in prime-time ratings (Jensen, 2007). Jensen (2007) suggested that the day-time drop might be attributed to the fact that the Food Network is trying to introduce a variety of new content to the network, and long-time viewers might not approve of these changes. However, the new shows introduced for prime-time viewing were popular with participants who worked more hours and tended to watch the Food Network at night. These participants would probably not be aware of the changes in the day-time schedule, so it makes sense that the prime-time ratings did not change and in fact went up quite a bit.

Participants in this study prefer in-kitchen shows over any other type of content, and this is the type of programming Food Network was known for since its introduction in 1993. Waldman (2008) reported that Rachael Ray was the most popular Food Network personality, but a quarter of participants reported Ina Garten as their favorite chef. Her show, *Barefoot Contessa*, was listed by approximately 40% of viewers as their favorite program, which appears to be a direct correlation between the television personality and the show itself.

It is important to note that the network has been successful in extending their reach to male viewers when it used to be a primarily female audience. Several male viewers noted personalities like Bobby Flay and Guy Fieri as being inspirational to male chefs. The male to female ratio in this study was close to the 70/30 women to men ratio of the average Food Network daytime audience, and the majority of participants fell between 44 and 54 years of age, which is consistent with the average Food Network viewer's median age of 46. If the Food Network can learn to balance their programming content between being helpful and informative as well as entertaining and fun, they might be able to keep their core viewers as well as encourage more interest in younger and male audiences.

Study Limitations

Study limitations include generalizability, issues with several survey questions, and content changes involving the Food Network and the Food Network website. The results cannot be generalized beyond the sample who participated in this study as the sample was not random and instead was gathered based on willingness to participate. In order to get the detailed data the research questions required, a random sample was not possible as each participant needed to have some prior knowledge of Food Network content. Therefore, it was difficult to find 100 people who not only watch the Food Network on a regular basis, but who were also able to provide relevant answers to the given questions.

Although participants who completed the sample surveys appeared to fully grasp what the study was trying to achieve out of each open-ended question, a couple of the

questions could have been clearer. The question “How do you feel while watching the Food Network?” drew responses such as “good,” “fine,” and “I don’t know.” It would have been more useful to pose the question “What feeling(s) do you have or get while watching the Food Network?”

The open-ended questions listed were intended to draw in-depth, detailed answers from participants. Several of the questions did not include the word “Why?” at the end, which resulted in general data instead of detailed data. The questions “What is your favorite type of content on the Food Network?” and “What are your top three favorite shows on the Food Network?” should have had the word “Why?” after them.

When asked “What are your top three favorite shows on the Food Network?” several participants listed food-related shows that air on other networks instead of the Food Network. *Top Chef*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, and *Take-Home Chef* were cited a couple of times as favorite shows. Before it was determined that the best way to distribute these questionnaires was by email, a separate list containing all of the current Food Network shows was printed out. However, not wanting to send too many attachments to potential participants, this document was omitted when the final surveys were distributed. Also, Food Network continues to introduce several new shows on a monthly basis, so participants who answered towards the beginning of the data collection potentially could have had an alternative favorite show than the one they listed.

Finally, five open-ended questions were asked about FoodNetwork.com in an attempt to collect data relating to media interactivity. Roughly halfway through the study, FoodNetwork.com was completely renovated. The questions mainly had to do

with how well the Food Network and its website worked together. The majority of participants who had filled out the survey before the website revamp liked how easy it was to use and search for recipes; after the renovation there were complaints about how difficult it was to use. While some of the questions remained relevant, the questions about what FoodNetwork.com users liked and disliked about the site and the question “Do you think the Food Network and FoodNetwork.com work well with each other? Why or why not?” were eliminated from the data coding.

Suggestions for Future Research

Special genre networks continue to emerge as technology increases the available network airspace. The Food Network emerged due to the appeal of single-topic programming within various program content. As long as viewers can get their media needs satisfied by consuming content based on solely one topic, competition for audiences and advertisers between special genre networks will remain high.

Future research on the Food Network could provide detailed insight to what audiences think of the changes the Food Network are putting into action. An untold number of new shows have been put on the air since this study began, new television personalities are emerging, and the Food Network website is completely different than what it used to be. Understanding audience gratifications of these changes would be useful in shaping the plans the Food Network makes going forward.

Similar research methods exhibited in this study could be applied to the study of other special genre networks to gain deeper understanding of those audiences. It appears that networks know a great deal about who their audiences are and which shows they

watch the most; however, if the reasoning behind audience motivations was better known, the information could be applied to producing other shows, and, in turn, raking in more advertising dollars.

The uses and gratifications theory continues to apply to research regarding each form of new media technology. As levels of interactivity within and between technologies continue to grow, it will become more and more important for networks to not only know who their audiences are, but to understand why they have that audience in the first place. Audience motivations can change from day to day, and it is important to monitor these changes on a regular basis in order to keep audiences loyal, happy, and entertained.

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